

Chapter 3

Challenges and Obstacles of Distance Learning in Higher Education: Example of Faculty of Economics, Matej Bel University, Slovakia

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ABSTRACT

The chapter characterizes the transformation of the learning process from full-time to distance learning on the example of Faculty of Economics, Matej Bel University in Slovakia, during the COVID-19 epidemic in the form of case study. The chapter analyses the strengths and weaknesses of this process during the summer semester 2019/2020 based on the secondary data and results of a questionnaire survey among faculty students realized in 2 rounds – in the first stage of transformation (April 2020) and after the end of summer semester (June 2020). It identifies the key steps that have (or had) to be taken to overcome the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and the key challenges for the future development of virtual learning as a full compensation of full-time form of study from the students' and faculty's perspective. This case is an example of smart education in crisis situations. The results show that distance learning can be a suitable complement to the fully presence learning process, and temporarily, it can replace it in emergency situations.

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INTRODUCTION

The worldwide outbreak of Covid-19 has a great influence on all spheres of life, including delivering higher education services. The implementation of IT tools, and modern software applications involved into the learning process has rapidly speeded up during a few months. In the learning process the lecturers must look for new teaching methods that support the interactions with students and retain their attentions with various IT tools.

In the Slovak Republic, the implementation of virtual technologies in the learning process from primary to university education has been significantly underdeveloped during the last decades. That is why all educational institutions have had to face fundamental changes in the organization of the learning process, from pedagogical as well as technical point of view.

In the chapter, prepared in the form of a case study, we aim:

- to analyse the transformation processes in teaching, from fully presence to fully distance form of study on the case of Faculty of Economics, Matej Bel University,
- to compare the findings about the strengths and weaknesses of this process based on a questionnaire survey among faculty students realized in 2 rounds – in the first stage of transformation (April 2020) and after the end of summer semester (June 2020) with a theoretical framework of distance learning as well as results of foreign research studies,
- to identify the key steps that have (or had) to be taken to overcome the second wave of the COVID-19 epidemic and the key challenges for the future development of virtual learning as a full compensation of full-time form of study from the students and faculty perspective (represented by managers and lecturers).

Background

The Covid-19 epidemic has significantly changed the world since March 2020. It has affected all areas of our life including educational services. The strategy how to deal with this issue in the learning process differs by country and the decision may be made at national, regional or local level (Abuhammad, 2020). At universities, distance learning has become the most preferred form of learning as an effective approach to meet the learning needs of students (Hannum et al., 2008; Irvin et al. 2010). Teaching-learning via ZOOM, or other online communication platforms, webinars, e-consultations, previously popularly considered as part of non-formal education, gradually replace the formal education system (Mishra, Gupta, Shree, in press).

However, distance education has been part of educational process for more than 150 years. Its development was very progressive in three main forms of study – correspondence study with its use of print-based instructional and communication media; distance teaching universities, and the last one, very actual also in the times of Covid-19 pandemic, interaction of distance education elements in most forms of education with the use of digital instructional and communication technologies (Simonson, Schlosser, Orellana, 2011).

Distance education has been researched from various points of view (e. g. Wang, Shan-non, & Ross, 2013; Wang et al., 2013; Wilde & Hsu, 2019; Bower, 2019; Gonzalez et al., 2020), it was confirmed that effective online learning is a result of careful instructional design and planning (Hodges et al., 2020). Bozkurt (2019) defines distance education as any learning activities within formal, informal, and non-

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